



Testimony of
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Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
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HB 6097 An Act Concerning Tuition Waivers for Paraeducators Who Seek a Degree in Education

Good afternoon, Senator Slap, Representative Haddad and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee. My name is Shellye Davis and I have been a paraeducator in the Hartford Public Schools for 32 years. In addition to being Executive Vice President of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, I am proud to serve as President of the Hartford Federation of Paraeducators, AFT Local 2221. I am here today to testify in support of HB 6097 An Act Concerning Tuition Waivers for Paraeducators Who Seek a Degree in Education.

Paraeducators play an essential role in supporting student learning. We provide one-on-one assistance to students with disabilities, help manage classroom activities, lead small group instruction, provide real-time translation for English language learners, and facilitate communication with families. Yet we are among the lowest paid staff members in school buildings, earning less than a living wage. Despite our experience in the classroom, we also face real barriers to career advancement. HB 6097 could make a significant difference.

Like many other states, Connecticut is grappling with a significant teacher shortage. Class sizes are larger, teacher workloads are more extreme, and districts are over relying on long-term substitutes. Statewide, schools had more than one thousand unfilled teacher positions before classes began last fall. Students in urban school districts are suffering the most. New Haven had more than 100 teacher vacancies and Hartford Public Schools, where I work, had about 200 teacher vacancies.¹ Special education teachers are in the greatest demand, with about 225 openings statewide.

I understand that some may not be comfortable with the use of tuition waivers as a workforce development tool, but I ask you to consider that paraeducators are reliable, worthwhile investments. They have already been part of the education process and have experience supporting students. They aren't idealistic about what being a teacher will be like. They know exactly what they are getting into, and once they become certified, they are able to reach proficiency much quicker than a recent graduate with no practical classroom experience.

In addition, paraeducators are more likely to resemble the student population where they work -- racially, culturally and linguistically. They are also more likely to live in the district in which they work, bringing continuity and stability to the community and their students.

¹ <https://www.ctinsider.com/news/article/Connecticut-schools-in-crisis-amid-long-term-17586364.php>

Paraeducators have the teaching skills and the experience. They just need the degree. Many want to make the leap to teaching, but there are no formal programs to help them. As low-wage workers, the likelihood that paraeducators can afford to pay tuition at a four-year institution is virtually non-existent. HB 6097 creates a much needed pathway and I urge the Committee to support this bill.

I thank Representative Khan for introducing HB 6097 and thank the Committee for holding this public hearing. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.